

Amy Hagopian and Caitlin Palo

Policing the Divestment Debate

American universities bristle with governing bodies representing the interests of various constituencies in campus life. Student and faculty associations confront the usual parochial and prosaic topics—parking, fees, and office space—but these organizations also offer opportunities to stage dialogue about broader interests, sometimes concerning far-flung parts of the world, including Palestine. Conversations about contemporary political topics of the day can be compelling because they allow us to clarify individual and institutional values and bring disciplinary expertise to pressing social issues. Civil society organizations, academic and otherwise, regularly allow democratic expressions on a variety of issues to expand an organization's traditional boundaries (Hagopian, Ratevosian, and deRiel 2009).

In recent years, the plight of Palestinians has increasingly come to the attention of academic organizations (Palumbo-Liu 2015). Israel has restricted population movement in Gaza since the early 1990s, but the air, sea, and land blockade was intensified in June 2007 in response to growing Hamas political strength. Since then, 1.8 million Palestinians have been denied free movement in and out of Gaza (OCHA 2017a). In 2008, Israel conducted a three-week bombing campaign, dubbed Operation Cast Lead, leading to the deaths of 1,383 Palestinians, including 333 children, with 5,300 injuries (OCHA 2017b). Simultaneously, the grassroots nonviolent Palestinian movement known as BDS (boycott, divestment, and sanctions) has grown, with increased visibility and outreach in the United States. With the July 2014 Israeli invasion of Gaza, preceded and followed by swelling settlement encroachments on Palestinian territory, and the passage of Israel's November 2014 Nationality Law

codifying the religious identity of the state, life in Palestinian territory is increasingly immiserated. Academic organizations have taken stands; among the first of these was the Association for Asian American Studies, which in 2013 voted to support the boycott of Israeli academic institutions. The American Studies Association (2013) voted similarly later that year “to honor the call of Palestinian civil society for a boycott of Israeli academic institutions.” The National Women’s Studies Association (2015) also joined the international BDS movement.

Now, campus-specific organizations are also joining the conversation. UAW Local 2865, which represents the University of California’s sixteen thousand graduate student workers, voted by 66 percent in December 2014 to become the “first major U.S. labor union to call for BDS against Israeli occupation and in solidarity with Palestinian self-determination.” Other student associations have passed similar resolutions to express support for Palestinians under occupation: UC Irvine in November 2012; UC San Diego in March 2013, UC Berkeley and Northwestern University in Evanston in February 2015, and Loyola University in Chicago in March 2015 (see also USACBI 2017). At the University of Washington, there have been three attempts to pass resolutions by student organizations: the Associated Students of the University of Washington (ASUW, representing undergraduates), the Graduate and Professional Student Senate (GPSS, representing graduate students), and the Academic Student Employees’ Union, UAW 4121.

ASUW

Students at UW concerned with human rights in Palestine proposed to the ASUW a “Resolution to Divest from Companies Profiting from Violations of International Law and Human Rights,” which requested the UW revise its investment portfolio accordingly. The three-page resolution, R 20–39, was appended by three pages of references to support its claims. The debate erupted quickly and could be characterized as unfriendly at best, resulting a month later (May 20, 2014) in a significant voting defeat (8 for, 59 against, and 11 abstaining).

GPSS

On May 7, 2014, the UW GPSS narrowly voted against supporting the same Palestine resolution as introduced at ASUW. Among the 42 voters, 15 abstained (perhaps too befuddled or intimidated to take a stand), 13 voted for the resolution, and 14 voted against.

UAW 4121

Following on the University of California success by its sister UAW local 2865, the UW graduate student union approved a letter of support for that effort in February 2016. The UAW's rank-and-file caucus, Academic Workers for a Democratic University (AWDU), had organized to approve the letter quietly and effectively (many members having been involved in the previous contentious debates at ASUW and GPSS). At the regular membership meeting on February 11, 2016, members present unanimously approved the letter. Statements of support and testimony from Palestinian students and workers were the only comments made during discussion of the resolution. No opposition, or even hesitation, was voiced, perhaps because advocates had conducted persuasive one-on-one conversations in advance.

Discursive Impasses

Stand with Us and other national pro-Israel groups provide followers with tested devices to shut down rational debates on the merits of Palestine resolutions, relying on established forms of discursive manipulation that violate some of the very norms they claim to defend. Arguments against the UW resolutions followed themes now widely familiar because of examples on many campuses: singling out, threats to safety, lack of authority, demands for "civility," lack of standing (or the none-of-our-business claim), name-calling, complexity, and lack of balance. In the following paragraphs, we describe some common characteristics of the hobbled debates surrounding UW student resolution efforts.

Singling Out

Claiming unfair and unequal treatment is generally effective in an appeal to fair-minded people; this has worked well in opposing claims of Palestine advocates, as well. For example, a UW Change.org petition (Huskies against Divestment 2014) garnered 1,439 signatures on a statement that chided ASUW resolution proponents for "singling out" Israel. The text from the petition reads, "as students at UW we believe that this resolution displays a *singular side* of the complex Palestinian-Israeli conflict and creates a harmful atmosphere on campus—isolating communities" (Huskies against Divestment 2014; emphasis added).

Robbie Ellenhorn, a UW student, spoke at the GPSS debate over its resolution, which he said "strikes at the heart of why [he feels] the BDS

movement singles out and demonizes Israel (GPSS 2014: 181). Similarly, at the ASUW debate, Ellenhorn said, “This resolution is not about human rights, but about singling out Israel and demonizing it. Who are they fooling? Look at the title, why is it that the resolution targets only one country?” (ASUW 2014: 33). By the standard implicit in Ellenhorn’s observation, no violation of human rights should be protested anywhere without protesting every other violation, simultaneously.

Threats to Safety

Campuses are home to many young people who have (and whose parents have) an expectation they will be kept safe in this environment. In a letter to another campus in Washington State, Rob Jacobs wrote, “anti-Israel divestment initiatives spread hatred and misinformation about Israel. BDS undermines education, mutual respect, and understanding on campuses” (Dvorin 2014). He prioritizes the safety of Jewish students with pro-Israel views, without concern for the injuries to Palestinian students. There seems to be little appreciation for the irony or the learning opportunity of having been put in an uncomfortable position. Rabbi Oren Hayon, Greenstein Family Executive Director of Hillel at UW, in an article for *JT News* following the defeat of the ASUW resolution, identifies the rhetorical strategies deployed to defeat BDS resolutions as “pyrrhic”: “I do believe BDS is a threat to the Jewish community—but not because it will usher in a new wave of anti-Semitism or violence against Jews anytime soon. Most immediately it makes Jewish communal institutions entrench themselves like armies and forces educators to think like generals. And, predictably, it will always be our students who bear the most devastating casualties of this mode of engagement” (Hayon 2014).

Lack of Civility

Rudeness is unmannerly, uncivilized, and, well, rude. In the GPSS divestment debate, opponents circled around what is often referred to as “incivility.” Ellenhorn testified, “this sort of demonizing speak isn’t moving us toward productive conversation or solution where each side is about to reach out and reconcile their hardships. It is directly and intentionally put there to demonize Israel. This extremist rhetoric is dismissive and destructive” (GPSS 2014: 17).

Not Our Business or Lack of Standing to Have an Opinion

Opponents of organizational resolutions are often effective when urging the membership to stick to narrow topics well within the safety zone of the group's culture, history, and mission. Accusations of lack of standing in UW debates parallel practices seen at the national level. A lawsuit filed in April 2016 alleges the American Studies Association's vote to boycott Israeli universities in 2013 was not legal because its constitution at the time of the vote limited the association's activities to "the promotion of the study of American culture." Further, the lawsuit claims, the defendants' "operation of the ASA as a 'social justice organization,' including through the promotion of a boycott against Israel, is outside and inconsistent with the purpose of the ASA's constitution" (Redden 2016). This trope, that meddling in Israel's occupation of Palestine is outside the scope of an organization's stated purpose, is echoed at the local level.

The UAW vote to send a letter of support to its sister local was a narrowly defined time-limited victory, and there was little ability to retract it once the letter had been sent. Members who later learned of the vote and opposed it, however, found opportunities to revive the debate in discussions of other topics. For example, in a discussion about a bylaws amendment later in the spring (which would have expanded the capacity of UAW to address social justice issues), pro-Israeli contestants challenged the character, principles, and motivations of AWDU caucus members. Under the banner of critiquing the amendments, members debated BDS. The primary question was the relevance of international solidarity to the purview of the bargaining unit.

One comment posted on the public online forum characterizes a common critique: "I believe our union should be focused on negotiating for the just working conditions and wages of our membership. . . . We are being asked to divert our very limited resources to join a quixotic fight against imperialism and patriarchy. Imperialism and patriarchy are not the concerns of a union of grad students" (Koncel-Kedziorski 2016). Other opponents said the BDS issue was "not putting money in our pockets" and "not the bread-and-butter" of the union.

Name-Calling

Name-calling dates to everyone's childhood as an effective means of shutting people down. The AMCHA Initiative maintains an "Antisemitism Tracker" on its website, where it documents "antisemitism at institutions of higher

education in America.” One can scroll to the University of Washington, where this entry (among nine other listings) appears, labeled as anti-Semitism: “4/18/16—SUPER UW held a panel entitled, ‘Racism, State Repression, and Empire: Palestine and International Solidarity’ as part of ‘Israeli Apartheid Week’” (AMCHA Initiative 2017). Apparently staging a panel discussion about racism and occupation is inherently anti-Semitic.

A listserv email from an ASUW senator opposing the resolution addressed to a Jewish Israeli postdoctoral fellow (who had written to ASUW senators in support of the resolution) said, “there is something antisemitic about delegitimizing the Jewish homeland and attempting to cripple it financially, . . . you have no place at all in ASUW politics. . . .”

Complexity

Convincing participants that a situation is too complex to understand can persuade them to at least abstain from a controversial vote. A campus newspaper account of the ASUW debate quoted a speaker from Huskies against Divestment (the UW mascot is the husky dog): “the resolution oversimplified a complex conflict and presented a one-sided narrative that does not make an attempt to understand or tell the other side of the story” (Lopaze 2014). By contrast, the ASUW seemed able to endorse specific stands on consequential (yet safer, perhaps simpler) political issues when passing resolutions against the Iraq War and against extra-congressional intervention in Iran. What appears as deference to a norm of informed debate (honoring complexity) functions as a means to disable debate on specific topics figured as irresolvable.

Lack of Balance

Organizations and their leaders want to be seen as measured and wise. The Change.org petition cited above included this statement: “Instead of a one-sided resolution which privileges and promotes one side’s claims over the other, we should be working towards a solution that promotes the rights of both sides of the conflict. The only way to productively address the suffering Israelis and Palestinians have endured is to encourage both sides to make the painful compromises necessary for peace. Divestment does the opposite by pointing fingers and laying blame on only one side.” Similarly, Jeffrey McNerney, an ASUW officer, urged a no vote because it could damage the organization’s credibility by “supporting one side in an emotionally charged argument with geopolitical implications” (ASUW 2014: 27).

The Wild Card

Sometimes these debates take unexpected turns. In one particularly bizarre twist, a fraudulent e-mail communication was generated over the signature of an ASUW vice president to a resolution supporter: “You are wasting my and everyone else’s time every time you open your mouth about this resolution. I am personally going to make sure that you look like an idiot on the Senate floor and this resolution fails just like your entire life. . . . Now please SHUT THE FUCK UP.” It was determined the e-mail was fabricated as a hoax to disrupt the dialogue. A perpetrator was never identified.

Prerequisites for a Meaningful Debate

Organizations that have successfully taken progressive stands on political matters in earlier years are usually better positioned to consider Palestine resolutions, as they have limbered up their debate muscles and are less afraid of the consequences of debating and taking controversial positions. When academic organizations embrace a range of controversial debates, of which BDS is only one, it becomes harder to block critical debate on BDS specifically. And vice versa. For example, more recently, ASUW has taken a position to support the housing of Tent City III, a Seattle homeless encampment community, on the university campus. This might not have been possible without a history of controversial debates, including the unsuccessful divestment resolution.

We also note that face-to-face debates are different in character from online or e-mail-based controversies, although certainly many in-person debates are preceded (and followed) by electronic exchanges. Similarly, the public performance can sometimes be the mere culmination of hard work done beforehand; some live victories must be followed by ongoing efforts to sustain commitments.

Successful resolutions are often proposed by “caucuses” or subgroups of the main body. For example, the graduate student union resolution was promulgated by AWDU. These caucuses provide a mechanism and a political home for like-minded progressives to work together within the organization and to lay groundwork for the resolution before it is presented for public debate. Moreover, coalitions working on the intersections of various forms of oppression also do important work in opening contexts for debate. As an example, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), founded in 1913, was established by Jewish leaders to stop “the defamation of the Jewish people” (ADL 2017a) but also “to put an end forever to unfair and unjust discrimination against . . . any sect

or body of citizens” (ADL 2017b). The problem for the ADL is that for many modern civil rights activists, solidarity with Palestinians is taking precedence over the old solidarity with American Jews. As reported by NPR (Gjelten 2016), a new landscape of political activism was evident in Ferguson, Missouri, in the days and weeks after a police shooting there. Instead of finding solace from ADL, activists from the Black Lives Matter movement “bitterly attacked the ADL” over its connection with Israel. The watchdog group Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (SPME), for whom “anti-Israelism [has] no place in our institutions” (SPME 2016), worries about the recent rise in campus activism generally, and has noticed the ties between those engaged in both Palestinian rights and Black Lives Matter efforts. A recent posting on SPME’s website blames intersectional activism for violence: “BDS supporters back violent attacks against Israelis, as ties with ‘Black Lives Matters’ and the far left increase” (Joffe 2015). The “complexity” gambit described above depends on disallowing a comparison of oppressions. The technique is to define the Israel-Palestine conflict as singular; one cannot analogize the situation of Palestinians to Jim Crow or Apartheid. One effect of these intersectional alliances is precisely to undermine these claims of singular complexity.

Notwithstanding the pushback, academics, students, and faculty alike are positioned to offer visions of alternative positive futures informed by history and analysis. Academic positionality offers opportunities to build solidarity with teachers and scholars across the globe in pursuit of nonviolent solutions. The International Association of Universities has declared every university is obligated to promote, through teaching and research, the principles of freedom and justice, of human dignity and solidarity (Voicu 2005). Resolutions by student and faculty organizations on individual campuses are vehicles to fulfill that obligation.

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